

What could be the “Imaginary Institution” of the City?

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1 ABSTRACT

In his book “The imaginary institution of Society” the French philosopher Castoriadis wanted to explain the radical change of societies and their diversity. The social imaginary matters, and explains social change. But what is it today? The Castoriadis’s answer is mainly a criticism of the imaginary of the bureaucratic society (perfect anticipations). He hoped more autonomy. We propose this interpretation of the imaginary of the City: the main myths are personal strength, chance (here the reference is the Ulrich Beck’s book “The risk society”) and individual happiness (the reference being the works of the French philosopher Lipotevsky). We are able to explain the discrepancy between public policies (including city planning) and the real social needs. It exists because the doctrines used lag behind the “social imaginary significations”. The concerned fields are the beauty of cities, spatial segregation, women in the city, environment and drugs...

2 INTRODUCTION

In his book “The imaginary institution of Society” the French philosopher Castoriadis tried to explain social change thanks to social imaginary. We shall describe the intellectual backdrop of the Castoriadis’s works, and set out his hypothesis. Then we shall propose a hypothesis on the social imaginary “establishing” the city of today: the main myths are personal strength, chance and individual happiness.

We conclude on the discrepancy between public policies, including city planning, and the real social needs. The used doctrines lag behind the social needs because these needs depend on “social imaginary significations”, themselves elusive and always changing. Concerned fields are the beauty of cities, spatial segregation, women in the city, environment and drugs ...

3 THE INTELLECTUAL BACKDROP OF THE CASTORIADIS’S WORKS

3.1 The French tradition in sociology

The French sociological tradition starts from Durkheim. These authors were very much influenced by anthropology. They took myths and culture very seriously, but they seem today unable to explain modern societies. This can be illustrated by examples of famous books. The celebrated Mauss’essay “The gift” is brilliant but of no help to explain modern societies. The Bourdieu’s book “Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste” insists on the stratification of the French society and describes the signs allowing to distinguish upper and lower statuses. But as early as the twenties, the American sociologist Sorokin warned that occidental societies are mixed for centuries, due to vertical and horizontal mobility. Today all is shared: tastes, fashion, spectacle ... (Lipovetsky, 2013). And there is the equalizing effect of risk, since often public goods are concerned, pollution, security, health ... (Beck, 2008). In the same way Bourdieu states that the domination of men on women is fixed in culture and language. But he is unable to explain why women struggle for new rights. They are often successful (Lipotevsky, 2006).

The books of Roger Caillois remain very interesting. In his book “Man and the sacred” he states that periodical feasts allowing breaking taboos are a necessity for societies, to re-establish their values. And he concluded that today these feasts should be replaced by inevitable wars... But in modern societies there are many feasts that are not (too much) violent. For instance, kitsch is a feast breaking the rules of the formatting of tastes by brands and advertising (Lipovetsky,). In another book, “Man, play and games” he stated the universality of game, taking four shapes: Agon (competition), Alea (chance), Mimicry and Ilinx (vertigo). He warns that there are excess and abuse... But in modern societies everyone plays games. The choice made is “general deregulation” (Lipovetsky, 2013). In some cases, society opposes its own players, the regulators, to players who deserve control (finance, telecommunications, health ...). Even the cities play games: Agon (competition), Mimicry (when mid-sized cities imitate the most famous large cities). For instance, cities in China bet on economic growth whatever the consequences on environment are, while Boulder (Colorado) in

the USA bets on struggle against any pollution.¹ However, in this book written in the fifties, Caillois gives us an explanation on modern societies: the cult of stars (through Medias, movies, fashion...) is described, thanks to Mimicry and the author anticipates the “democratic imaginary”. In a competitive and egalitarian society, the hopes of everyone are never achieved, but the cult of stars allows feeling as successful as those at the top.

Another interesting book is the Régis Messac’s essay “The detective novel and the influence of scientific thought”. The author quotes Edgar Poe: “The Universe is a plot of God”. All things are linked together, since everywhere and always there are causes and effects... It is the myth of serendipity. The detective uses his extraordinary abilities to break the enigma. Here, that the French sociological tradition explains more Culture than Society appears. On Society, Messac says only this: time in the detective novel is linear, as it is in all the novels, except Proust’s “In search of lost time” (since in this novel, at the end, the main character becomes a writer, achieving his quest). One can compare to the Siegfried Kracauer’s book “The detective novel”. He extends the scope of his topic to Society: the detective novel displays the realm of the Ratio. That is to say, the capitalist society works and it is enough, the human fails but this is forgotten and the question of the influence of Ethics on Law is not posed.

A last example is the book of the sociologist Fauconnet, “The responsibility”. He states that myths and values (or culture) are the causes of Law. Decades before the publication of the famous book of Michel Foucault “Discipline and punish” he shows the awkward dilemmas of any theory of Law. However this book is forgotten. Even if the idea of the influence of myths and values on Ethics and Law is very much relevant, there is no word in the book on the role of Medias, the power of Opinion, the egalitarian ideal etc.

We conclude that the French sociological tradition (between the two World Wars) rightly insisted on myths and values, their impact on Society, but failed to describe social change and the modern society.

3.2 The discovery of the consumers society. The consumers society was anticipated by the Frankfurt School and discovered in the USA after the Second World War. One can quote the Kracauer’s book “The salaried masses” and other books on popular culture, life in metropolises and movies. Adorno wrote books on cultural industries. The discovery of the consumers society dates from the David Riesman’s book “The lonely crowd”. One can also quote the Vance Packard’s essays on marketing, waste, the tastes of American people (pets, statuses, social climbing...) and the very rich etc. In France the ideas of Mac Luhan were popularized and modernity was described in the books of the sociologist Edgar Morin “The spirit of the time” (on popular culture), “The stars” and “Cinema or the imaginary man”.

4 THE CASTORIADIS’S THESIS

Castoriadis explains radical social change thanks to the social imaginary. All our actions, ordinary or extraordinary involve “social imaginary significations”. These social imaginary significations make up a “magma” which is coherent at some time. This explains the “specificity” of a given society. The magma is also “arbitrary”, meaning that it changes in a way which is not determined.

In the Castoriadis’s works there are these characteristics:

- He abandoned Marxism because the law of decreasing profits is not observed (he was also an economist).
- Being also a psychoanalyst he abandoned Freudianism because this theory does not explain the diversity of societies. But he kept the hypothesis of Oedipus complex, which explains the socialization of the individual. The infant is submitted to a constant flow of images and representations, and “selects” some of them to make up his (her) personality (character, vocation...). The coherence of the “magma” grants that the social roles are consistent: for instance, in our society characterized by technological change, vocations like innovation (in a technological field), technician and financier are coherent.
- The Castoriadis’s thesis is not merely a return to the “totality” of Marcel Mauss. He criticized the “inherited thought” as being deterministic. He wanted to save the idea that social change is not determined, but “arbitrary”, or unpredictable. He hoped an evolution of society towards more

¹ Sometimes some games seem too violent, and a majority appears which obtains the ban. A real foe of games is ... mathematics, since when mathematics discover the winning strategy, a game loses any interest (Caillois, 2012).

autonomy, rejecting “heteronomy”. Indeed, according to Castoriadis, it is uneasy to “guess” or “interpret” how the magma (of imaginary social significations) changes. He criticized the myth of the “bureaucratic society”, the perfect anticipations. Perfect anticipations are impossible. Unpredictable events can always occur, as it has been stated by Taleb in his famous book “The black swan”. The most serious prospective will only propose scenarios without any given probability, which cannot cover all that is possible. In technical terms, one can propose two scenarios with unknown probabilities p_1 and p_2 , and $p_1 + p_2 < 1$. It is “imprecise information”. Add to this that the theory on optimal decision in the context of imprecise information is only a mathematical theory in progress... The consequence is that complex modeling (in prospective) is uneasily understood by Opinion (also, it is sensitive to imaginary significations). To take an example, the scenarios of the IPPC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) are uneasily understood by Opinion. But the “precautionary principle” is more understandable, being a qualitative reasoning (and corresponding to some imaginary signification, prevention from the worst environmental risks).

- Castoriadis did not forget economy. There are two ontologies. One is practical, economic and codified thanks to logics. It is Thought and Action, codified and deterministic. This ontology is ensemblist / identitarian. The other ontology is historical / social, submitted to the social imaginary.² The myths are “shored up” in economy and practice. Society and social change are explained only when one considers the two ontologies.³ Of course, what Castoriadis forecast (or hoped) for Society did not occur. Instead of Revolution and its agents (the workers councils), there was the Opinion directed society, instead of participation, there was sharing and a division of labor more and more sophisticated, instead of autonomy, there were rights which are granted only if Opinion feels concerned, instead of the end of privileges, there was the appearance of new privileges (like visibility) ...But Castoriadis understood the role of social imaginary and the end of the influence of any transcendent doctrine

5 WHAT COULD BE THE “IMAGINARY INSTITUTION” OF THE CITY?

There is no clear method to “interpret” the social imaginary (concerning the City). One could have recourse to analysis of Cinema, since it is the art of our time (Lipovetsky, 2013). In his two books on Cinema, “From Caligari to Hitler: a psychological theory of German film” and “Theory of film: the redemption of physical reality”, Kracauer shows the metropolis as the place where meetings occur, allowing anyone to construct his (her) life.⁴ All depends on chance. Kracauer commented the Grune’s movie “The street” several times: the main character is fascinated by the street, representing risk and chance, but finally prefers security at home. If myths are “shored up” in economy, chance should be accepted as a kind of value. Chance is everywhere in the economy of today: deregulation, refusal of the “too big to fail” and venture capital... Regulation is required only when the failure of some actors will trigger other failures (effect of contagion). In the Taleb’s words, antifragility requires exposure to risk. According to Lipovetsky other myths are individual happiness and success, and equality. It is the consequence of an individualistic and democratic revolution in the seventies and eighties, generating the “second modernity”. Many movies show the narratives which concern individuals, the dramas they live, the particular problems they meet and the dilemmas they cope with... There are still privileges, but they are not popular. For the Opinion, matter only equality and meritocracy. The abilities of any individual are tested: he (she) has to achieve success (here we see that myths are “shored up” in practice and economy) and also happiness. We conclude that personal strength, chance, individual happiness and success and equality are important myths (in cities). Other myths exist like Fertility, Manliness, Childhood, Maturity, Nature and Technology etc. but are subordinate to the most important myths.

² One can take the example of Ethics and Law (not dealt with by Castoriadis). The historical / social ontology determines Ethics. And Theory of Law is in accordance with Ethics and submitted to the ensemblist / identitarian ontology. Theory of Law is part of codified knowledge (called *Legein* by Castoriadis). The difficulty of Theory of Law is explained by the opposite characters of the two ontologies.

³ In the detective novel, according to Messac, the ensemblist / identitarian ontology explains Society. Therefore crime is only an enigma to be broken. If we take into account the historical / social ontology, crime has to be ethically judged. It is the point of view of Fauconnet.

⁴ This includes anomic people who need to meet persons to share ideas and projects. They meet them in the city.

6 THE DISCREPANCY BETWEEN AUTHORITIES’ POLICIES AND SOCIAL NEEDS

The “imaginary social significations” matter and it is difficult to interpret them. Therefore their consequences are uneasily understood. That is why there is a discrepancy between the authorities’ policies (including city planning) and the real social needs.

This problem has two aspects:

- According to Lipovetsky we have to create a sustainable consumers society, and this project is replete with double binds: production has to be abundant, but not polluting, eaters should be satisfied, but not fat, (hyper)consumption requires using natural resources but they should be preserved, Information Technologies should develop but individual liberty being preserved (it is the stake of data privacy) etc. In a few words, the (hyper)modern society requires quality of life.
- When science and technology create new devices, this diffusion generates unexpected social effects. Sometimes Opinion, which is worried about some risk, makes a narrative (concerning the risk) of its own, neglecting all that was said by experts in the past. Decisions follow. It is the appearance of a “risk community” (Beck, 2008). Examples in Germany are sulfur disseminated in the atmosphere by plants and the decision to end nuclear production of electricity after the Fukushima accident.

Some examples can be quoted:

- Beauty of cities. We are at the time of “artist capitalism” (Lipovetsky, 2013). Beauty is required everywhere in large cities. At least, ugliness is banned. Elias Canetti in his book “Crowds and power” remarks that Metamorphosis is an attribute of Power. Therefore large cities, playing the game of Agon (competition), wanting to be models and to trigger dreams, are tempted to create new quarters: it is spectacular, in particular when a mega-event occurs in the city. There is a trend for large cities to be covered with building sites lasting years. What about the quality of life for those living in these cities?
- Spatial segregation. According to Lipovetsky what matters is not all the people living in the prestigious and nice places existing in the cities. That matters is that youngsters can go to these places, wearing Nikes or Pumas, to have fun there. Finally what matters is jobs (for the youngsters). Of course, all the places in cities have to be well equipped, which allows provision of basic services. But social mixing should be bearable, provided that youngsters have jobs and have access to consumption (since it is their real desire). Indeed, spatial segregation has a bad effect according to Jane Jacobs: those needing advices (to cope with adversity) are away from those able to give these advices. And this matters: according to Lipovetsky, today ethics is not forgotten but it has to be painless because it involves narcissist people (Lipovetsky, 2000).

It is better if there are fewer obstacles (that is to say, if those needing advices are near those able to give advices).

- Women in the cities. As there is a strong demand of nurseries, municipalities (and sometimes firms) provide them. It allows women working while having and raising kids. Perhaps in doing so one favors a society of single men and women raising kids (Beck, 2008). Often women who do not work and divorce, raising one or several kids, fall into poverty. They are numerous, benefitting from social assistance. It is a consequence of the strong “egalitarian imaginary”. Women want to be equal to men, working while having kids. Beck forecast a “war between genders” as a consequence of this strong women’ desire for equality.
- Environment. Municipal authorities have the choice between two policies, preserving environment or not. Of course the choice is political and ...electoral. Many cities are active in this field: clean public transportation, attrition of car traffic, reduction of carbon dissemination in the atmosphere, public gardens and even measures in favor of biodiversity... They have made up a world association. Indeed, the artificiality of the City has won (at least in large cities). Nature is a myth subordinate to the myth of individual happiness, which is achieved thanks to hyperconsumption. That is to say, some “natural products” are good for health, landscapes provide décor for holidays and remote places allow nice movies etc. Nature is more a strong myth in many mid-sized cities. All this has bad consequences if we consider the future: Opinion should take seriously the stake of saving the Planet, in particular when global warming is concerned.

- Drugs. Today Opinion has not made some clear choice, concerning drugs. In general repression is approved, but this could change. Let us recall that there are two shapes of liberalization: decriminalization (sales of drugs are not punished) and legalization (sales of drugs are licit and organized under the control of the State). For instance, in the USA two States, Colorado and Washington have liberalized drugs. Another stake is “supervised injection sites”, which are permitted in several European countries (Germany, The Netherlands ...). It is controversial. In some cities people refuse the opening of such sites. Here we see myths in conflict. On one side, the myth of the second modernity being individual happiness, all that allows individual happiness, including use of drugs, should be permitted. On the other side, the myth dating from the first modernity is self-control (Lipovetsky, 2013). Using drugs is disapproved because it is a lack of self-control since health is supposed to be destroyed. Lipovetsky quotes the criteria of women’s beauty: it remains thinness, which means self-control.

7 CONCLUSION

We have insisted very much on the works of authors like Castoriadis or Kracauer, who knew and analyzed the first modernity. This is justified, because the second modernity is only the accentuation of the features of the first modernity, individualism, search for happiness and equality ... (Lipovetsky, 2013).

We conclude examining the role of Technology.

At the time of the first modernity, Technology was one of the main myths, since it was the means to achieve an abundant production and win shortage. Today (at the time of the second modernity) Technology is more a myth submitted to other ones like individualism and happiness: Technology is valued as a means to achieve health, beauty, allowing nice trips and attractive spectacles etc. An example is when a drone flies among birds, shooting images of them and the ground.

The first to study life in the metropolises (authors like Simmel and Benjamin) noticed that people living in cities are submitted to “shocks”. The citizens parry the shocks thanks to indifference, blunting or snobbery (or coquetry) according to Simmel. According to Benjamin the remedy to shocks is ...shocks, which can be found in movies or architecture in glass. Today new ways to look at the physical reality appear: drones shooting images, special effects and visual effects in movies, computer graphics, creation of imaginary worlds generated by computers for videogames, cameras fixed on the bodies of sportsmen or animals and 3D television or movies... Perhaps there is the appearance of a new “perception” of the urban environment by citizens, allowing overcoming the “shock” of urban life (Fuzessery, 2008).

An example is the serious game Blockholm, organized by the municipality of Stockholm. They use the virtual platform of a very popular videogame, Minecraft. It allows building “blocks” to obtain a virtual environment, in which the player plays the game (there are several modes, the player has to survive, or to win monsters etc.). A player playing the game Blockholm acquires a plot and builds the building he wants on it. The virtual environment replicates the site of Stockholm. The result will be a kind of virtual Stockholm. The most beautiful buildings will be converted into mock-ups and shown in an exhibition (Geoinformatics, 2014). It is taking into account the imaginary dimension of the city. The result of this serious game could show the dreams triggered by some city, which are expressed in the buildings imagined by the players.

It is an example of exploring the imaginary dimension of the city (in the field of architecture). More generally, the “reflexive modernity” (Beck, 2008) requires examining the “social imaginary significations” of the City and their consequences. It is a condition to remove the discrepancy between authorities’ policies and real social needs.

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